

Ember in the ashes

Gemma's Writing

Star Wars

Complete



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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)
[Title Page](#)
[Copyright Information](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Summary](#)
[1. Ember in the ashes](#)

Summary

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Description:

Padme's heart leapt up into her throat as their eyes met once more. Why was he doing this? Couldn't he have left well enough alone? "What a pretty little wedding..." The Sith Lord smirked, "What a shame that it's over."

1. Ember in the ashes

How had it come this far?

Padme's hands trembled visibly where she held them before her eyes, choking on the breath unwilling to leave her mouth as people flurried around her, all blissfully unaware of her panic. Somewhere in the room, Sola and her mother laughed as the click and flash of holocams captured the day from every angle. Memories to be cherished for the rest of her life. Behind her, Corde and Rabe worked diligently to fasten every silken little button lining her spine. Each one felt like the link of a chain dragging her to hell. Everybody said it was *normal* to be nervous on her wedding day, it was the most important day of her life, after all, it would be strange if she *wasn't* anxious!

Nervousness did not feel vast enough to describe the cold swell of dread building inside of her. Padme felt sick. She hadn't been able to eat for two days as the apprehension and guilt had worsened every hour this day grew closer. Everyone staying in her apartment to make final preparations had laughed indulgently and told stories of their own pre-wedding nerves and described how much it would all be worth it as she'd picked at her food and nodded along.

Would it be worth it? Padme wanted it to be with every quaking inch of her heart. This path was the *right* path, it was one most women in the galaxy prayed to the Maker herself for an opportunity to walk upon... and here she was longing to throw herself from the nearest window for an escape. Maybe death would take her and she would be free? Maybe she would wake up in a medcenter somewhere far away with no memories of who she was and what she had fled? Either option sounded more appealing than the day which truly lay ahead.

In every holo-vid or story of weddings and marriage, it was always a great celebration of pure *love* between bride and groom and their union. Padme had always wanted that for herself, a great, sweeping love which left her forever changed and bound to her soulmate for as long as her life lasted... and she *had* it. Only, it wasn't with her fiancé.

Bail was a wonderful man. A kind, generous and intelligent man. He was everything she had believed she wanted in a life partner, someone she could depend upon, work closely beside to better the galaxy, someone who positively affected her life in almost every way — Bail did *all* of that. As her fellow Senator, their match brought their systems closer together and their Queens were ecstatic with the news. It made *sense*. Who else could patently understand the gruelling schedule of her busy days and long nights better than someone who had his own to face?

Her fiancé was every part as passionate about their work as Padme, they had been great friends for many years before Bail had proposed and their work was always greatly influential and effective throughout the Senate. She could only *imagine* what they could accomplish with the rest of their working lives together. Bail also desired a family just as she did. She had thought she would have a family of her own long ago, just like her sister, but work had always come first to meeting someone to settle down with. Bail had expressed a keenness to

build a family quickly, he had longed for a child of his own to raise for many years before their engagement and didn't wish to wait much longer.

It was *perfect*... only that it wasn't. Every time her mother's eyes filled with proud tears Padme died a little inside. Her father's excitement to *finally* walk her down the aisle was a physical agony she couldn't shake off. How could she open her mouth and tell them how *unhappy* she was? The Nabberie family were traditional people at heart who longed for nothing but to see both their daughters settled and cared for. They often worried themselves sick about her and the dangers of her career, so a wedding and marriage was a balm they more than deserved. It wouldn't be *fair* of her to ruin this for them!

Of everything about this day, Padme *hated* her wedding dress most of all.

Tightly laced at the bodice to respectfully plump her breasts, the skirts were wide and shimmering layers and layers of snow-white tulle she could hardly take a step without tripping over. As an early wedding gift, Bail had engaged the services of an acclaimed and illustrious designer from Alderaan to create the gown custom to only her. No one in the galaxy would ever wear the same wedding dress and something about that *had* seemed rather exciting at the time, but it was wrong, wrong, *wrong*. From the very beginning, Padme had been talked over and shushed by everyone around in their own excitement over the dress and its creation until there was *nothing* of herself in the garment.

All she had ever wanted was a simple, traditional Nubian wedding gown crafted of lace and pearls and yet the enormous gown was a modern design she would have never picked on her own. There was not even a veil as everyone had agreed it would distract from the intricates of the dress itself and instead, her hair had been curled and pinned half-up and half-down and decorated ruthlessly with ornate little bejewelled flowers and beads until her scalp ached and throbbed for mercy.

Someone — she honestly did not know who — declared it was time and Padme closed her eyes to will away the slight sting of unwanted tears as they began to build. Some people did not marry for love and had very happy marriages regardless. She was hardly about to walk to a waiting executioner, this was her wedding! This day wasn't about her, it was about Bail and their people and their families. She would find some joy in it. There had to be something she would like.

Bail is a great man, she repeated in her mind, he will do anything to make you happy.

Suddenly, she was walking, watching Sola and her mother slipped away to join the waiting crowd of guests in the colossal ceremony room of the holy building they had selected for the day. Great stone statues would overlook their vows along with the guests and the very thought of their unmoving eyes made Padme's stomach roll. Her skirts swished with every step she took by her father's side until they reached the towering, arched doorway which would send her to her fate.

"You look so beautiful, my darling," Ruwee smiled blissfully as they awaited the musical cue from inside. Her legs began to tremble. How was she going to make it all the way up the aisle without collapsing and humiliating herself? More tears welled up within her eyes and every ounce of willpower in her body kept her from shaking her head.

Padme didn't feel beautiful. She felt like a doll, an object moved around per someone else's choices with no acknowledgement of her own, but a true adult life required sacrifice to make things work, she knew that all too well. There was much her heart longed for but could never have, not in this lifetime. No, it was time to stop mourning all which could never be and find a way to enjoy what was before her. Anything else was stubborn immaturity.

"Thank you," she forced herself to smile although the slight movement felt like lifting her starship above her head with her own hands. As Ruwee offered her the crook of his elbow, beaming in his green velvet finery for the day, Padme slipped her hand through and tried to find solace in the solidity of her father beside her. He would not let her fall. It would be over more quickly than she thought, that was what everybody said about a wedding day. It was just one day.

From inside, soft stirrings of stringing music began to slip through the doorway and a moment later, they began to slide open, revealing Padme and Ruwee to the awaiting guests inside. The faces of four-hundred people standing on their feet turned to them at once, gasping and whispering their thoughts as her father began to lead her inside. Walking didn't feel quite as impossible after the first step though it never became easy as she looked upwards at the grand, colourful window of stained glass reflecting small rainbows downwards and onto Bail.

Bail...

Her husband-to-be grinned joyously at the end of the aisle, nervously adjusting his ocean-blue robes as he awaited her approach. Despite all of the happy faces around her, Padme held her breath and focused her vision on Bail alone. Her fiancé, her soon husband, her friend and partner, looked elated as her white satin heels stepped onto the spread of bright red Nubian blossom petals lining the path toward where he waited. They were supposed to seem romantic — it had been her small attempt to replicate the feel of the simple, intimate outdoor wedding she had truly desired — * but now each petal was a droplet of blood leading her to a fate she could not escape.

No. She had stop! She was being dramatic. Trying to quieten her mind, Padme refocused her eyes on Bail as he shared a happy smile with his friend sitting in the very front row, so proud of her, so grateful that she had chosen him too... If only he knew the truth. If he knew the darkness which had touched her heart and held it in its grasp even now at this moment. Would he still desire her? Or would he cast her aside like everyone else would if the truth ever came out? No one would ever forgive her if they knew what she had done, who she had been with and longed for. How could they?

Every careful step was an invisible hand tight around Padme's clenching throat as the journey toward the aisle was reaching its end quickly. Her dress began to feel tight — *too* tight. She couldn't breathe. Maker help her, she *couldn't* breathe! Why was the room so cold? Was everyone else shivering? *Liar*, a furious voice roared within her mind, *you're a liar. You are deceiving everyone!*

Only four short steps before she reached Bail, the holy man and the alter where her married life would begin, Padme stopped walking, almost tripping her father with the suddenness. He jolted around with a questioning expression but her mouth could only gape soundlessly. Panic surged deep inside her. She couldn't speak. She couldn't pull a full breath

into her lungs even as they begged for more. All around them, low whispers began to fill the room as she stood frozen, unable to talk or move any further.

“Padme...?” Her father frowned but she could not find the will to meet his eyes. Inside her chest, her heart was frantic, beating faster than it ever had until it was almost painful in the centre of her chest. A tight, ungiving pressure pressed onto her, crushing her and it felt as if she might splinter to pieces right here before everyone. What was she *doing*? Everyone she knew was here — her *Queen* was here watching her make a spectacle of herself! And yet, she did not move. She *could* not move.

It was too much! Too many people watched her, waiting for *something* but Padme didn’t know what to do. This moment was choking. It was inescapable — almost more so than the life enduring vows she was mere moments away from making and binding herself to the sweet man waiting for her just a few steps away. What was happening? What was she supposed to do?

“Padme?” Bail murmured her name quietly, inching one half-step toward her as the whispers grew and grew but her name wrapped in his gentle voice only worsened the panic storming inside her and Padme felt herself stumble backwards two steps, dragging her arm free of her father’s as both men watched in horror. What was she doing? She begged her frantic mind yet again but the answer never came. If she walked toward Bail now, took his hand and married him, the moment could be laughed off and forgotten as a momentary jitter but if she turned and ran, people would always remember. She and Bail would be ruined. There would be gossip and rumours for the rest of their lives. She had to go on with it... but she couldn’t. She *couldn’t* take another step.

No... the word formed on her lips but her breathless lungs could not muster the strength to voice it. *No, no, no!* She couldn’t do this. She *couldn’t* do this. Somehow, Padme had to say it. She had to break the hearts of everyone around them because she was selfish and spoiled and was about to ruin both their lives. The ghost of her rejection lingered on her lips — she wasn’t strong enough. Tears filled her eyes and Padme felt one wet trail dampen her cheek.

Someone help me, her mind pleaded, the Maker, the universe, the stars, *please, someone get me out of here...*

“Bail...” Her voice was hoarse and cracked, but before Padme could force another word beyond her dry lips, a deafening *boom* filled the room like a sudden crack of thunder. The doors were blown from their mechanical bolts and hinges and flew across the room with such force that they broke through the stone walls, shattering several windows in the vibrating aftermath.

People screamed, falling to the ground to protect themselves as showers of glass tore across the room. Padme whirled around to the doorway as Bail’s tight face morphed into sheer terror and her stomach sank as a hooded figure wrapped in a black cloak emerged through the smoking, circuit laden doorway.

“It’s him!” Someone cried, “Maker help us!”

“What are we going to do?” A female voice wailed through the dark smoke filling the room

The cause of their terror stood at the beginning of the aisle amongst black tendrils of smoke which snaked around his body. The figure reached up and adjusted their cloak, lowering the loose hood which concealed their face. As it fell to his neck, painfully familiar, sandy curls, a smug grin and bright, golden eyes came into the light.

Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith. Apprentice and heir of the cruel Darth Sidious who plagued war upon the galaxy and threatened everything Padme had ever worked. The famed fallen Jedi Knight who had embraced darkness to avoid the rules of the Order who had found and raised him from boyhood. Cruel and infamously calculating, wherever Vader appeared on the battlefield, the Republic would *lose*.

Padme knew him all too well.

“Hello, Angel...” the Sith smirked as he leisurely glanced around the room, relishing the potent fear in the air as people raced out of the room in droves, screaming and crying for help as their legs carried them as quickly as the building crowd would allow. A glint of silver on his hip caught Padme’s eye, his lightsaber, the blood-red blade which had taken more lives than she cared to think about.

As she silently gaped at the intruder, her father clung tightly to her arm, as though he could possibly defend her from the Sith Lord before them. Padme wanted to tell him to run, to find her mother and the others and get as far away from here before whatever came next. Vader was unpredictable and quick to anger, being around him was to flirt with death itself, but she knew Ruwee would never leave her.

Without weapons to defend themselves they were trapped and stranded and Vader *knew* it. Even if every single person remaining in the room had a blaster in each hand, they still stood no chance of defeating him. Battalions of trained soldiers and many Jedi had tried and failed — what chance did they have? Why was he here? Padme’s heart leapt up into her throat as their eyes found each other across the room. Why was he doing this? Couldn’t he have left well enough alone?

Eventually, Vader walked the length of the aisle, his long, black cloak sweeping the petals aside behind him, “What a pretty little wedding,” the Sith smirked at Bail who paled further with each step he took toward them, ‘What a shame it’s over.’ As his thick, black boots came only a step away from where Padme had stilled, his golden eyes admired her gown and hair for a moment before clicking his tongue, “Admittedly, I’m no expert on fashion... but I wouldn’t have thought you were a big ballgown kind of woman, Angel.”

“Why does he keep calling you that?” Her father glanced between Senator and Sith with wide, confused eyes until Vader held up his hands in a mocking display of peace.

“You have nothing to worry about, Mr Nabberrie,” Vader’s smile appeared almost genuine for a moment. Almost. “I have no intentions of harming anyone today — especially you and your daughter... but I *do* have orders to carry out, I’m afraid.”

Behind them, Bail found his voice at last. “Get the hell out of here, Vader!” He snarled, “You are not welcome here!”

Stop it! Stop now! Padme wanted to scream at them both but it was already too late. The Sith Lord chuckled and shook his head, “My Master has had a great interest in our lovely Senator Amidala here for some years now. He has decided that it’s long past time they met in

person. An invitation like this is rare — you should be excited.” Something bright and deadly glinted in those golden eyes — he was *enjoying* this, Padme realised

and cold dread seeped through her body. Darth Sidious had sent Vader to collect her? She was a Senator for the Republic Senate — his enemy! His previous apprentice had attempted to have her killed numerous times even *before* the war had been declared! Had he finally grown tired of waiting and decided to deal the blow with his own hands and have it over with?

“Touch her and you die!” Her fiancé cried but Darth Vader’s smirk only grew with obvious amusement. What could Bail do against a man as powerful as him? Lifting his black-leather gloved hand, a great invisible force suddenly shoved both Bail and the holy man backwards against the wall where they slumped and groaned from the pain of such harsh impact.

Though Vader chuckled, the sound was like cold death and his face grew hard, “From this moment onward, I’m afraid that statement applies only to you, Senator Organa.”

Without allowing Bail any time to recover and form a response, the Sith Lord grasped Padme by the wrist, drawing her to his body with one sharp tug. Her father cried out but did not move lest Vader’s powers turned on him too. “Don’t worry, she’ll be safe with me,” he said then turned his head just an inch, so his warm breath whispered against her cheek. “Hold on tight, Angel.”

The room around her disappeared in the blink of an eye as a fierce wind pummelled against Padme’s face and body as the world around her stretched and morphed into long, blurry lines of shapes and colours for a few moments. It was all she could do to cling to the Sith Lord whose arm held her so securely against him for balance. When everything came to a stop once more, they were alone in the cockpit of his starship and Vader moved to the controls to pull the ramp inside to prepare for taking off.

“Apologies about the running,” he glanced at her sidelong, “it was the fastest way to get out of there before someone found a blaster and got brave enough to shoot it.” Padme couldn’t help the furious scoff which burst through her lips as he spoke. *That* was what he was apologising for? *Running*? What was wrong with him? He had to be mad if he thought she cared about the running after he just ruined her wedding to drag her to her death!

White-hot fury burst to life deep in her stomach and Padme clenched her shaking fists into the tulle of her skirts. “How *dare* you?!” She cried, “How could you?”

Instead of shrinking back from her anger, the Sith merely chuckled yet again, leaning back casually on the control panel and folding his arms across his chest. “I’d almost forgotten how beautiful you are when you’re angry...” Exhaling furiously, Padme quickly glanced around the cockpit for something, *anything* to throw at him but, unfortunately, no weapon presented itself. ‘You know,’ he unfolded his arms and stepped toward her, his movements confident and yet careful, “I was expecting some form of thanks now that we’re alone.”

Beneath them, the engines came to life and the ship trembled as power filtered through it. Padme glanced over her shoulder and wanted to cry. The doors would be sealed now. She wouldn’t be able to get past him to cancel whatever flight path he had imputed before it was too late. It was too late. “*Thank* you?” She shook her head, almost sputtering with rage, “Why

the hell would I *thank* you for ruining my wedding and abducting me on your Master's behalf?"

Vader's eyes narrowed suspiciously, "I saved you from a marriage you didn't want. You needed someone to get you out and I did."

"That's not..." her voice cracked and trailed off in the midst of her lie. She *hadn't* wanted to go through with it, she had been moments away from finding the strength to utter the words on her own when he burst through the doors — but that didn't mean that Padme had somehow summoned him! That was impossible! "I didn't ask *you* for anything," she shook her head.

"I sensed you," he stalked closer, towering high above her as the ship trembled and began lifting into the air. It wasn't smart to be standing while it was happening but Padme was frozen to the spot, trapped by his eyes as they caressed her face with the intensity of his gaze. "I could feel your panic as if it was my own. You were begging for an escape before you even knew it — good thing I was already on my way."

"So you *abducted* me?" She hissed, "You had no right, Vader!"

"I did you a favour!" Padme saw irritation spark within his eyes, anger that she wasn't grateful as he had imagined for his deranged theatrics, 'Now Organa doesn't need to know how much you loathed the thought of marrying him. You can blame it all on me. I don't care what your little friends think. If it frees you, I'll happily shoulder the burden,' after a moment, he added, "and we're alone now, Padme, you can use my real name."

She didn't understand... why was he doing this? How had he even found out about today? The guests had been warned of the strict privacy of the event so it wouldn't leak to the public until *after* they were married! She had counted on his ignorance to get through the day! "What do you *want* from me?"

"Want?" Vader — *Anakin's* eyes widened angrily for a moment before he set his jaw, tearing his eyes away. 'What do *I* want?' He shook his head, "I want you to have been *honest* with me, Padme!" His voice began to rise, "Did you really think I didn't know what you were doing last time we saw each other? That I didn't see you were trying to say goodbye?"

Unbidden, memories of their last encounter two months ago played before her mind. Deep, lingering kisses and round after round of furious lovemaking until neither of them could move from the exhaustion of it. She had never wanted that night to end because, in the daylight, she would be forced to face the reality of her life. A Senator of the Republic could never love a traitorous Sith Lord, it was impossible — especially while he waged a war against everything she stood for.

She had thought it would be easier if he learned of her marriage after it had already taken place. If it could not be undone Padme let herself imagine that he would be too angry, too betrayed by her deception to even *want* to see her again. She had been naive and foolish, she could see that now, but what was done was done and her life was in ruins behind her.

"I — I thought it might be easier this way," she began but Anakin only scoffed, "I thought that you would move on if you knew what I'd done... what I'd kept from you..."

"I already knew about your engagement then," he growled, "My Master heard the news and shared all that he knew, including his enraged frustrations at the conjoined power such a match would bring to your little grouping of Senators who undo all he works for. It gave me an excuse to take you away before you made the biggest mistake of your life."

Despite her guilt, Padme couldn't help but glare upwards angrily at him though Anakin's expression didn't change. "So now what? You'll hand me over to him and watch as he finally kills me? Is this your revenge for me lying to you?"

"Revenge?" He laughed softly, lifting his flesh hand to caress Padme's cheek with the backs of his fingers, "I am furious with your lies and attempts to deceive me so you could wed another man and there will be a discussion about that soon... but this was no revenge, my love, only my way of rescuing you from such a miserable fate as a dull, passionless marriage. My Master has no interest in meeting you — his only request was that the wedding be stopped, an order I was all too happy to carry out. For now, we're going to my palace on Mustafar, far away from the Republic and the aftermath of today."

Padme's mind spun as she listened to all he had to say. The lies, the casual deceit — were they ever fully honest even with one another? She could not begin to imagine the disaster they had left in their wake today, the worry and horror her family had to feel imagining their daughter in the hands of the evil Sith Lord the Jedi Order fought so hard to uncover. It was cruel to let them worry when she was safe with this dangerous, possessive man who would die before ever seeing her hurt... and yet, the thought of contacting any

one made her stomach roll in horror.

Secretly, though she would never admit it to him, Padme was relieved. Breathlessly, indescribably *relieved*. If events hadn't transpired as they had, she would have been married and miserable trying to smile for the cams and for the sake of her new husband and their families. Or maybe she would have found the strength to leave before it was too late on her own. Maybe she would be alone in her apartment right now, bleeding guilt knowing the great disappointment she had caused.

In reality, they were going to Mustafar. Very few had ever stepped foot on the burning planet, full of searing rivers of blistering lava. It was a world of smoke and ash, not exactly her *first* choice of hiding place but for now, it would do. It would have to. Where else could she go? It would not be very long before the news made it to the public and whispers were spread. They couldn't be seen in public until things calmed down.

Anakin had told her all about his looming, black towered palace before, his sanctuary between battles, a place he shared with no one but droids who handled the upkeep of every room. Padme sometimes imagined it, so quiet and lonely, overlooking grim, black sand beaches and glowing lava far below and wondered how he found his peace in such a place. But then, he was of darkness and channelled its power in everything that he did, perhaps somewhere like that was harmonious to him as the lake country of Naboo was to her?

A cold shiver of exhaustion raced through Padme's body and she wrapped her arms around herself tightly. "What happens now?" She lifted her heavy eyes to find his own softening as he watched her movement closely. Would they hide for some weeks until she could return to society unharmed? It wouldn't be any easier to face reality then, but at least she would have some time to prepare herself.

“Now?” He shrugged his shoulders, “I suppose I will pilot us to Mustafar to be sure no one has had any ideas about following us, meanwhile, you should take off that hideous dress and get some rest. You look as if you haven’t slept in days, Angel, and that’s my job.”

The small jab at the dress she despised somehow lifted Padme’s lips just a little, despite *everything*. The thought of laying down now that it was all over was more appealing than anything in her life. She wanted to sleep for a whole week and wake when the trouble passed for good. “I don’t have anything else to wear,” she shook her head, “I’m uncomfortable enough standing here, I can’t see laying down being any better.”

“Well, you know,” something playfully smug lit up the Sith Lord’s eyes as he began to smirk, “it wouldn’t be the first time you slept naked in this ship...” When Padme did not laugh or smile, his humour fell away with an uncomfortable clearing of his throat. “I have some simple tunics in there, you’re free to borrow whatever you need for now.”

Padme nodded, just barely stifling a yawn as she made her way to the small resting area of his ship. It was smaller than her own gleaming silver star skiff but the bed was wide and comfortable and right now, that was enough. She could have slept just fine curled up on the floor. Soon, she would think about finding a way to contact her family and maybe the Queen to soothe their fears but the rest could wait for now.

As the black door slid shut behind her, she reached around her body to undo the buttons of her gown, but even as she grimaced and groaned, reaching and bending and *almost* slipping the first button through the small loop, Padme couldn’t free herself. She huffed, glaring at the walls of the room and set her hands on her hips for a moment. *Why* couldn’t the dress have come with an easy zipper built into the side? Maker, she *hated* every single thing about this damn thing!

“Anakin?” Padme called out just loudly enough for his keen senses to pick up. No matter how hard she tried, she wasn’t getting out of this thing on her own even if the thought of him lending a hand was a little embarrassing. After just a moment, Anakin strode through the door as soon as they slid open enough to allow his body into the room, lifting a curious eyebrow as he did.

“What’s the matter?” He asked, carelessly tossing his cloak in the direction of the small built-in wardrobe space instead of hanging it up. Padme bristled, despite herself, and rolled her eyes. He was *always* so messy! She knew many Jedi and had worked with them more than once throughout her career and they were always pristine, focused and in control — she could not imagine someone like Master Yoda throwing his cloak around like it was nothing... but then, Anakin *wasn’t* a Jedi and hadn’t been for four years, it was no longer a fair comparison. He crossed the few steps between them in short strides until she felt the heat of his body against her own.

Anakin’s proximity seemed to wash away the sharpness of her tiredness leaving Padme alert as she battled down a fierce urge to lean back against the solidness of his body. All she had been able to do these past months since he left was focus on the wedding, on pleasing her family and Bail, there hadn’t been any time to miss him as she usually did. It had been easier to pretend she was a young woman excited to marry the good man who promised himself to her than to accept the bleakness of her life without Anakin in it.

But, she *had* missed him. She always missed him. Without Anakin, or even the promise of him, the galaxy was colourless and bleak, she hadn't known all she was missing until he had come back into her life, cloaked in black and smirking as he and his droid army had taken control of a smaller system she had been doing charitable work within two years ago. He had changed so much from the little boy she had stumbled across on Tatooine so long ago, grown and scarred and forever changed by life and the choices he had made which led them here.

Padme wished things could be different. She wished darkness hadn't taken root deep inside him, that Darth Sidious' influence hadn't been strong enough to turn him from the destiny his mother had sacrificed everything for. She almost wished her morals were weaker and she could stand to follow him wherever his choices led. Anakin had his own wishes too, she knew that he wished she was not so steadfastly loyal to the Republic, or that she might step away from her duties to stand by his side instead, but none of that could ever be, no matter how they longed for it. So they stole what they could, clung to fleeting moments and rare days in each other's arms and it was enough. It had to be enough.

"My dress," Padme sighed though every one of her nerves came to life at his closeness, shallowing her breath as Anakin bent just slightly at the neck to take in her scent. "I can't reach the buttons..."

Two large hands, flesh and leather-bound metal came to rest upon her waist for a moment and a soft ache sprang to life between her legs. Slowly, they climbed a blazing trail along the curves of Padme's body, inspiring lines of shuddering gooseflesh in his wake as they travelled around to trace the line of buttons decorating her spine with a single flesh fingertip. She hardly dared to breathe as Anakin's deft fingers began to guide the first satin button through the tight little loop holding it in place — how was she going to get through this?

"I had never imagined..." his voice came tight and strained behind her as two more buttons slipped free, gradually parting the tight bodice inch by inch. "I hadn't dared to *let* myself think of undressing you from a wedding gown one day."

Padme knew him enough to understand the truth laced through the quip and she shuddered as his warm fingers traced the small space of flesh he exposed. It had been two long months since he had touched her and her body had craved him every moment of every day since she had left him behind in the lower-level seedy little motel they had locked themselves away in for three whole days.

He undid four more buttons and the gown began to peel open properly, so Padme curled her arms around her body to hold the loosening material to her. Her breath was shallow and quick though her aching torso sagged with such relief to have the tight, constricting dress slip away at last. This was not a situation she had ever envisioned for them either. With Anakin, it was strangely easier to ground herself in the reality of their lives than to let her mind wander into what if's and wishes of what could be.

When his fingers reached the final button at the base of her spine, the dress parted enough to bear her whole back to Anakin's hungry gaze. His long, war-roughened fingers traced the curve of her spine and her breath caught in her throat. He had touched every inch of her body more times than she could possibly count but something tense lingered in the air between them, something which made everything more potent and almost a little frightening.

“Why?” Anakin asked, his deep voice coming in almost a whisper by her ear, creating another rippling shudder to tear through her body. “Why did you agree to marry him?” He asked and her heart sank with dread. How could Padme explain it without wounding him with the truth? There couldn’t be words to make him see that while he irrevocably held her heart in his possession, someone like Bail was the *better* choice for her life? Bail made sense. He was *easy*.

She had agreed to marry Bail because he was sweet and kind and he *wanted* almost everything Padme did too. They wouldn’t have to hide or deny their relationship and they could start a family, something they had *both* desired for so long... It had all made such sense when she had agreed and the joy of her family’s celebrations had been so wonderful, their excitement for them both had made it easy to ignore the vehement protests of her heart. Plenty of people had marriages of convenience, didn’t they? She had thought that one day her heart would learn to love Bail and would open itself to accept him with the same fondness and fire as it did Anakin.

How wrong she had been. How absolutely *selfish* and childishly naive could a person be? Now her life was in flames and Maker only knew what would happen to her once the truth came to light. At least hiding away in Anakin’s firey palace meant she could avoid the consequences for a little while, but the ashes would be waiting for her return. “I’m sorry,” Padme whimpered feeling her face begin to crumple as the crushing weight of her regret descended upon her at last, ‘I ruined *everything*,’ she shook her head, stepping away from her lover to turn and face him, clinging to the gown which desperately wished to slip to her ankles. “All I wanted... it just seemed to make everyone else happy and that felt *good*. I thought it was the easier choice.”

Anakin ripped his gaze away from her to glare at the wall by his side instead. Fury and hurt stormed deep within his eyes and despite all of the confidence he had projected as he ruined her wedding, Padme knew she had hurt him. She had hurt *everyone*. Slowly, he opened his mouth and then closed it again, shaking his head as if deciding better of whatever words had climbed his throat. “Here,” he said, at last, stepping to the small wardrobe space and pressing down upon the little keypad to slide open the door. Inside, a small mix of his dark robes and plain civilian clothing hung together in a curious contrast which normally would have made her smile, but she only watched curiously now as Anakin plucked a deep blue tunic from its hanger. “Turn around, Angel,” he said softly.

After a moment, Padme followed the gentle command, letting her wedding gown slip down her body to land as a wide puddle of tulle and satin around her calves and ankles. Even though it had been undone for several long minutes, it was still a relief to have it off her body entirely. Part of her never wanted to see it ever again. Lifting her arms, she could not help but smile, just a little, as Anakin carefully slipped the tunic over her head and gently guided her arms into the sleeves — perhaps any other time such treatment would be frustrating and belittling, but she only felt warm and cared for now. The softness of the fabric was a welcome change from before and she closed her eyes for a moment to enjoy his scent as it surrounded her.

“Get some rest,” Anakin made to leave his quarters then, “I’ll wake you when we get to Mustafar.”

Perhaps she was being selfish again but after everything that had happened today, Padme didn't want to be alone with her thoughts as she tried to fall asleep. Already memories of the growing, *knowing* dread painting Bail's face began to creep before her eyes and she dismissed them with little success. "Ani..." the affectionate name no living being in the galaxy knew of but her slipped from her lips, stilling the Sith Lord in the doorway, 'stay with me?' Padme asked, "Please? I don't want to be alone right now."

He idled in the doorway for a few moments before turning back with a small nod. "Of course, my love," he said and came back into the room, stepping forward as Padme slipped back toward the bed. She watched as he worked to undo his boots as she slid her legs into sheets and then his weight dipped the mattress beside her and she felt the warmth of Anakin's arm slithering around her body, drawing her to him and Maker help her, it felt like *home*.

Turning over, she buried her face into his chest and gripped at his coarse dark tunic as if he might fade away at any moment and she would awaken in the middle of the alter to relive the nightmare all over again. "I love you," Padme whispered against him and Anakin held her more firmly against him, beginning to stroke his fingers through the parts of her hair which were loose and free.

"I love you too," his lips laid a kiss on her head, "get some rest. We will face everything when you wake up."

Though the prospect of 'facing things' did not sound very appealing to the Senator, the warmth and comfort of laying in Anakin's arms again had her eyelids growing heavier and heavier with each passing moment. Whatever awaited her within the palace of Mustafar and the disaster on Coruscant could be dealt with later piece by agonising piece until her life had mended itself again, however long it took.

For now, Padme slept in her beloved's arms safe and warm and for one small moment, everything felt *right*.